UNBOOKS CLASSICS

DR. SKULLTHUMPER

The Frogs

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(The author is unavailable to make a dedication)

(In lieu of a formal dedication, we invite the reader to think about the friend in their life they'd go to Hell and back for)

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PART ONE: DEATH

IVAN TAYLOR WAS not a morning person. He didn't have much to say about the afternoon or evening, either. To him, the only morning worth being awake was one you stayed up rather than woke up for. Everyone exists at different times of day—his happened to be from about five o'clock in the evening on.

He often did his best thinking while walking around the city streets in the middle of the night. It wasn't a bad city, but he made sure to never wander aimlessly. Still, he enjoyed the in-between walks the most, something about, if not the silence, then the relatively dull snoring of the city.

Thoughts raced through his mind this particular night, thoughts about a television show he was writing with a good friend of his, Mark. Mark and he were polar opposites, but because of their different approaches, they often pulled stories together no single person could have

imagined. Of course, being polar opposites that they were, Mark only existed in the mornings and afternoons. Both of them lived their lives relatively separately, but met up in the early mornings and late evenings, the only times where they co-existed. This was where they planned and wrote.

Ivan was in the midst of having an idea, that annoying limbo of writers when they know there's something there, but they can't quite see it yet. He tried to grab at it, sneak up on it, analyze it in its frustratingly gaseous form, but nothing. Then, halfway across a street, it struck him, and so did a speeding car that had forgotten to put its lights on.

"OW," HE SAID.

He was on a sidewalk now, looking at his body to ensure nothing was broken. Miraculously, nothing seemed to be—in fact, nothing hurt at all.

"Aw, shit," Ivan sighed, pounding a fist on the sidewalk. "I'm dead, ain't I?"

"Good guess," said a female voice off to his right. As Ivan turned to see who was speaking, he noticed a dead man's body in the middle of the street. He didn't even have to ask.

The girl who spoke leaned against a building, her thumbs flying as she text messaged on her phone.

Ivan shrugged and raised his eyebrows. "Okay, now what?"

The girl closed her phone and put it in her

pocket, then turned to face Ivan. She was young, beautiful, but had an air about her that suggested you didn't want to get too close. Despite everything, she seemed terribly common, not angelic or demonic or anything extra-worldly.

"I'm your Death," she said. "I've come to take you to the next world. C'mon, stand up, this is boring me."

"My death?" Ivan asked. "You mean there's different deaths for different people?"

The girl sighed and spoke quickly: "Every person has their own Death, based on what they thought Death was while they were still alive. Oh my God. Textbook stuff. C'mon, Taylor, let's go already, my feet are killing me."

"You're a pretty boring Death," Ivan said bluntly, getting to his feet. While he stayed anchored to the ground, gravity didn't feel like it was moving against him anymore. The world around him seemed fake now, like a painting, a representation of what it once was.

"Well, death wasn't all that exciting to you, whadda ya want?" the girl explained, leading Ivan down the sidewalk. "Oh, you're complaining about me being boring, but in life, you used me."

Ivan shrugged and smiled. "Sorry, miss, but death is the prostitute of a lot of writers, early on." The world seemed to be falling away now, as though it were cracking, ripping, melting at every step.

“Yeah, well, anyway. You’re taking this well. We get told a lot of people might spaz out over being dead.”

“Well, it’s really screwing up my plans for tomorrow, but I guess there’s no sense in worrying about what can’t be changed, is there?” Ivan laughed weakly.

“Eh, you’re probably still in denial. You didn’t even ask who I was or where you’re going.”

“Afterlife, I assume?” He decided that if there was any time to ask those questions that had plagued his soul in life, now was it. “Will there be hot chocolate in Heaven? I can’t imagine Heaven without hot chocolate.”

“You’re a writer. You’re not going to Heaven,” the girl laughed.

“Where, then?”

“Just the opposite, Taylor.”

The last of the world drifted away. Ivan felt himself drop. There was a lot of noise, a lot of croaking, and a splash. There was no hot chocolate.

PART TWO: WESIR

BACK ON EARTH, luckily, hot chocolate still existed.

Presently, a cup of it was busy being held by Mark Flavian, the late Ivan's friend. Mark sat in an internet café, staring at his laptop screen, waiting for Ivan to arrive. Rather unsurprisingly, he didn't.

Mark called. Ivan's phone, lying cracked on the side of the road awaiting discovery by a police officer, didn't respond. Mark was puzzled, but not unduly worried. He and Ivan existed at different times of day, but neither of them were that good time-wise to begin with.

"Gooooooood morning!" a voice bellowed directly in Mark's left ear. Mark swiveled around so quickly he thought his spine was going to detach. His right hand, holding the hot chocolate, miraculously remained still.

There was a man. A grinning, polished man. Maybe early twenties. Only some amount of youth

could possibly exude that much happiness in such a small, human-shaped space. His lavender suit was perfect, as was every shining tooth in his mouth. Frozen in a smiling pose, Mark's eyes nearly tricked him into thinking the man was a wax statue.

Mark's left hand lifted off the chair's back. His fingers wiggled. "Hi," he managed, trying to return the smile.

"My name is Wesir. But call me Wes," Wes said, as though meeting Mark was the happiest thing to ever happen to him. Mark put down his hot chocolate and shook Wes's hand.

"Flavian, your friend Taylor is dead," Wes continued as they shook hands.

And that was it.

Mark Flavian was an ordinary man who dealt with ordinary amounts of weirdness. He had determined many years ago that he was crazy, and that the world was crazy, and they thus had an understanding. He and the world had made a deal —more of an understood agreement, really—that they wouldn't weird each other out too much while they had to deal with each other for about eighty years or so.

The world had just broken that agreement by sending this man, Wes, into this coffee shop, on this morning, and having him say that Ivan was dead. Something in Mark's brain snapped, and his legs decided to go for a run without asking for

approval.

Conscious control over his body returned when Mark was safely out of the café and catching his breath inside an alley. After the paralysis of fear died down, he turned to look –

"Really now, the dead freak out less than the living," came Wes's voice. Wes soon followed it, strolling into the alley as though he'd never run at all. "You forgot your laptop, Flavian."

"Okay, this isn't fair. You can't hit me with something like this so early in the day!" Mark yelled to the Universe at large. "And my name's Mark!" he added, returning to the present.

Wes's smiling green eyes looked into Mark's. "I like referring to people by their last names. It's how they're filed, after all."

"Filed."

"Calm down, buddy, you're gonna kill yourself if you don't breathe. Then I've gotta go chasing you into the Underworld, and trust me, the traffic down there is horrendous. Have a seat."

"Shut up, go away," Mark said defiantly. He looked at his right hand—it still held the un-spilled beverage from Heaven. "I have hot chocolate!"

"I have hot chocolate," Wes repeated mockingly. "Well, good, gives you something to drink. If you're not going to sit, then I'm just going to talk. Fair?"

Mark didn't respond, staring at the ground to

avoid Wes's judging glance.

"Good. Flavian, your friend Taylor is dead. Obviously you haven't been paying attention to the news, otherwise you'd have known that."

"We were going to meet, we were going to meet to talk about this scene we were stuck on in our television show," Mark explained, forcing the sentence out one piece at a time.

"That's good, but—he's dead," Wes grinned as though he were speaking to a child, hoping the message was getting through this time.

"He's not dead." So much for that.

"He's DEAD. DEAD. D—E—A—D. Gone. Six feet under. Sleeping with the fishies. Actually, that last one's not too far off…" Wes mused. "Point being, he died in the middle of coming up with an idea. A revolutionary idea. And now the world's missing that idea."

"That's a shame."

"It's more than a shame, Flavian, for all we know, it could have been the very idea that saves the human race! Wouldn't you like to see your friend again, get that idea back? I know I would. But I need your help."

"Wait, what? Are you telling me you can get him back? I don't even think he's dead, really. I think this is just another one of his jokes… probably getting me back for the chicken thing."

"I can't do anything, Flavian. You were one of his closest friends in life, according to your profile

anyway. You'd need to come with me to talk to Taylor."

"Why? You don't know what Ivan looks like?"

"Taylor isn't going to be exactly in his, er… human suit, so to speak," Wes smiled. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"I don't even know that he's dead. Leave me alone and let me drink my damn hot chocolate and wait for my friend."

"Hmm," Wes hummed, taking his eyes off Mark for the first time. His grin disappeared as he thought. "Well, it's obvious you don't believe me, and there's not a whole lot of time I want to waste with you figuring it out yourself, what with the crying and the denial and all that mess. Every civilization has its ultimate authority, a ruler, a god—"

"I don't care if God Himself came down here and told me my friend was dead!"

"—something more powerful than God." Wes scratched his wavy brown hair, then rested the laptop on a Dumpster and began to type. "Oh! I remember what it is now. Lucky we had someone from the Offices tip this particular company off."

"You can't prove to me that you know anything about death. Give up, I'm crazy, I'm probably hallucinating. I'm a writer."

"I can at least show you that the place where we're going exists," Wes said as he typed, "the place where your friend is now."

“How? The Internet?”

“Not just any place on the Internet.”

He finished his work and turned the laptop so that it faced Mark. Mark looked at what was on the screen, and couldn’t believe his eyes.

“A special division of Google Maps,” Wes grinned, “for your viewing pleasure, of course!”

“No… it’s true… it’s all true…” Mark fell to his knees in the dingy alley, the glow of the computer screen on his face. “You do know about death… I believe, I believe, damn it! Wait a minute—this is where Ivan is?” He squinted at the map in front of him. “Google Hell?”

“Nope, just regular Hell, thanks very much,” Wes said, closing the laptop. “Google maps everything, you know, they just don’t allow the public access to certain things. Might snap their minds.” Wes looked down at Mark, who was kneeling, frozen in shock, his hands held in front of his face. The hot chocolate lay spilled on the ground in front of him. He tapped the frozen man on the head. “Oh, well. Ready to go find your pal?”

PART THREE: GRIDLOCK

AS WES'S PICKUP truck bounced along the highway, Mark became still more convinced that the entire thing was one of Ivan's elaborate jokes.

Ivan and Mark had a history dating back to the days of middle school. They'd spent much of life not seeing one another, although one would get a prank e-mail or delivery from the other now and again as a reminder of school days.

Once, Mark dug through a box full of Styrofoam pellets sent from Ivan, only to find a single rubber band wrapped in plastic as reward for his effort. Over the next year and a half, Mark made it a point to collect every rubber band he came across until he had several balls' worth of rubber. He shipped these back in an even larger box. Two years later, there was another package at his door, with rubber band balls that eclipsed the ones he had sent before. A note was attached: "Mine are bigger."

These were the sorts of pranks that went on from time to time as both of them lived their separate lives. Harmless, simple ones. Since the fates had brought the two together to work on this television show, there hadn't been a single funny phone call or dubious e-mail between them. Ivan had been saving up.

He didn't recognize Wes, and would have remembered those green eyes if he'd seen them before. Nevertheless, a joke it had to be. And Mark was enjoying it a bit too much.

After a good twenty minutes or so of silence save for the autumn air rushing through the truck, Mark turned to Wes. "So! Hell. Anything I should know about it?"

"Don't worry about it, bud," Wes answered. "Hell is a fantastic place to live, so long as you're not the one being tortured. Oh, the old Hell used to be fires and people stuck upside-down in flaming pits and disembowelment, but now it's boring and green and still nice mind you, just a bit dull."

Mark nodded in mock understanding.

"You used to be able to travel the levels," Wes continued, as though bringing back old memories. "You'd never get bored. There was always something on fire, pal, I can tell you that much! Someone screaming or grunting or getting eaten. Alas, alas, time moves on," he sighed in conclusion.

“You’re sick,” Mark laughed.

“Yes, I guess I am, aren’t I?” Wes chuckled back. The two of them filled the little truck with laughter, whisked away by the stale air outside. It died down with a final “Ha” from Wes and a nervous smile from Mark. Awkwardness descended as gently as a two-ton boulder.

Wes switched lanes as the pickup truck approached the toll booths ahead.

“Don’t go into that one,” Mark warned. “It’s out of order.” He knew this from embarrassing experience, as did many other drivers.

“It’s not out of order,” Wes grinned. “Nobody knows how to pay it!”

“What?”

“Bud, that’s the entrance to Hell,” Wes explained, one hand on the steering wheel and one hand pointing to the toll booth ahead. “Hell’s not going to toll people that accidentally stumble into it, no.”

“What’s the toll?”

“Your soul!”

“Catchy,” Mark shrugged.

The pickup truck whizzed through the booth. For an instant, Mark felt the back of his neck getting hot, as though someone were glaring at him from an unknown direction. He ignored the sensation.

They’d gone through the toll booth on Earth, and came out the other side of the toll booth still

on Earth. “Hell looks a lot like Earth,” Mark observed.

“Oh, ha-ha, we’re not there yet.”

The world outside of Wes’s truck cracked like paint on an ancient canvas. Parts of the sky rained down in blue chips and chunks; the cars around them faded into streaks of color; the road fractured and split, huge sections of earth falling into an empty, deep blue abyss.

The truck ran out of road; the road they had been driving on was now a cliff, an island, in the midst of nowhere. It careened off the Earth and into the blue below, which faded into black as the truck fell further. Light patterns played on imaginary walls of the abyss, like the patterns you see at the bottom of a swimming pool when the sun shines just right.

Wes took his hands off the wheel and put them behind his head. Worlds in miniature rushed past, little frozen scenes and symbols from the collective memory of millions of human beings. Here was the Void, the place in-between the real and unreal, the living and the dead. Faces, voices, sounds, scenes, buildings and pyramids lay trapped in the Void, encased in bubbles. Forgotten memories. Abandoned memories. Times that history, and humankind, had left behind.

Mark could no longer take the sensation of free fall, and squeezed his eyes shut.

A FRIENDLY TAP on the shoulder, and Mark reopened his eyes. Looking down, he noticed his hands were digging into his legs, and he relaxed them. The truck sounded like it was idling.

"It's real, isn't it," he said, trying to shake the image of the Void from his mind. "It's all real."

He turned to see Wes, who was grinning toothily. "Yes," he replied in a low voice, giving a nod.

"Damn it!" Mark burst out, smacking the dashboard and glaring at it, as though challenging it, as a part of the Universe, to make his life even more incomprehensible than it was now. He looked out of the windshield for the first time.

The truck sat on a road that extended into infinity, an eight-lane monstrosity packed with vehicles of various shapes and sizes. There were cars, vans, buses… But this was no ordinary gridlock. As Mark scanned the horizon, he spied a trackless train, several boats hovering in midair, even animals with their annoyed riders trying to motivate them to move. Though the blue sky was as sunless as it was cloudless, the air was stifling hot. Pollutants belched into the atmosphere from every mode of transportation imaginable.

"Oh, don't worry about that, Flavian," Wes's cheerful voice broke in. "It's already taken care of!"

"Wha?" Mark asked, annoyed and exasperated by all this.

“The truck. You. Me. We’re all damned already. This is Hell, bud!”

Mark couldn’t take his eyes off the horde of angry drivers. “Hell sucks,” he concluded.

“Oh, we’ve only just begun! This has got to be the least interesting part.”

“Gridlock for eternity?”

“Of course not! Only until they get driven mad and escape their bodies for the second time. Then they move on to real Hell, and believe me, that’s the fascinating stuff.”

“How do they move on? Looks like they’re pretty much stuck, if you ask me.”

“Which is why I didn’t. You see, death is like a final madness. Your mind is filled with so many conflicting signals that it eventually gives up and leaves. It’s the same thing that happens here, after death—people are forced to sit in gridlock until their minds can’t take it anymore, and leave again.” He leaned closer to Mark. “It gets easier after the first time,” he whispered, as though sharing a secret.

“Doesn’t this move?” Mark exclaimed. “Ever?”

“About an inch every half-century, last I checked. C’mon, pal. We’ve gotta get going if you wanna find your friend.”

“There’s nowhere to—”

Mark heard a car door open and turned to see Wes climbing out of the truck. “Don’t feel stupid,” Wes said, sticking his head back in, “nobody

thinks of getting out. Literally."

Mark rolled his eyes and opened his own door. Wes kept his hands in front of him as he coasted between the idling vehicles; Mark followed, lagging behind somewhat. They reached the bushes off to the left and Mark nearly collided with of one of the signs of various shapes and sizes that littered the road on both sides. He glanced at them; they were printed in different languages. One of them had a sentence in English:

"Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here," Wes read aloud. "If only people'd pay some attention to that…" With that, he disappeared into the bushes and trees beyond the road.

PART FOUR: THE RIVER

THERE ARE TIMES to ask questions, and there are times to shut up and follow. In the middle of a battlefield, when someone yells “Duck!”, it’s not time to ask “Why?” If someone has a gun to your head and says they’ll shoot you and kill your children if you don’t hand over the money in the register, right now, it’s not a good time to say, “Really?”

And trekking through the middle of Hell, Mark wisely decided it wasn’t the time or the place to ask “Does this really exist?” Man could spend all his life wondering if the ground below his feet exists, but all that matters is that he can stand on it.

Hell existed. Or at least, it existed enough for Mark to walk on. It wasn’t what Hell was supposed to look like, in his mind, but Hell was Hell and there wasn’t anyone to complain to about the décor.

Wes led Mark through stunning green fields, where people gathered together in one giant picnic. This was Hell? Sitting in the grass under a cloudless—and, okay, sunless—sky, eating sandwiches and drinking lemonade?

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Wes asked as they passed between blankets and towels spread out on the ground.

"Too," Mark replied.

"The good part comes soon enough, Flavian. Just you wait!"

Mark wasn't sure how long they'd been walking, but he could see nothing but three hundred and sixty degrees of flat, green plain. No lions, no demons, not even a single fly—nothing that could go wrong. Which was when the Universe would have said "Ah ha! Wanna bet?", if it had a voice.

The world went gray. Thunderclouds rushed in to fill the sky. A torrential downpour erupted, followed by streaks of lightning that came close to hitting several of the picnickers. People panicked as they rushed through mud and ruined food, some collapsing to the ground in the hopes that the lightning might spare them.

Screams, thunder, the squish of mud, and the rush of rain filled Mark's ears. He turned to say something to Wes, but Wes was already dashing away from the scene.

"Wait up!" Mark yelled, running and slipping

after him. Wes's perfect lavender suit was drenched with water, and mud stains covered the lower part of his pants.

"Hell doesn't take kindly to tourists!" Wes yelled. "Use some common sense and run, buddy!"

Mark doubled his speed. The storm raged behind them, every thunderclap growing louder and closer. Mark slipped and fell, and the scene changed.

The ground rolled out from underneath him as though he were no longer attached to it; the clouds parted as quickly as they had come; for a moment Mark hung in a blank void of blue. Then tiles shifted in underneath him, each one clicking into its individual place. Shiny white tiles, millions of them, stretching to infinity in all directions. After the scene reassembled itself, Mark found himself standing a few feet away from Wes.

"Hell is all about perspective, Flavian," Wes said, staring into the distance as if taking in this new place. The sky's color matched the tiles, so that only the black spaces between the tiles and the two men's reflections were visible. "A field's only beautiful 'till the storm hits, don't you know. Come on," he said suddenly, looking Mark in the eye, "this way."

Mark saw that neither he nor his guide were wet or muddied despite the storm. Again, he avoided asking, even thinking, and followed directly behind Wes.

Wes put up a hand to signal Mark to stop. “There’s millions of these little worlds,” he explained. “Millions and millions, all on top of or next to or combined with each other. And every soul finds its place.” The tiles started falling away now, revealing nothing but deep blue below. “That’s the funny thing about the human brain,” Wes continued conversationally as the world fell apart, “it almost wants to torture itself. Hell just gives it the right setting.

“Take the tiles, for instance. Maybe there’s someone out there that fell and cracked their head open on a tiled floor, and they’ll forever regret that day.” Most of the tiles had fallen now, and the two that contained Wes and Mark plummeted into the abyss below. Wes went on, uninterrupted, as they fell down at the same speed: “This would be their Hell, they’d just walk around afraid of cracking their skull open forever, or maybe the tiles would just remind them of the little incident they had, the little spill. Imagine you died on a tile, and the afterlife was nothing but tiles… Hell, isn’t it? Don’t fall off the tile, by the way.”

Mark wanted to ask why, but knew he’d regret it after hearing the answer anyhow. So he just didn’t.

MARK AND WES trudged through several more worlds of Hell, each one unique and befuddling to Mark while sickeningly entertaining

for Wes. As time wore on, Mark found himself more open to conversation. At first, the only sounds came from Wes, which were mostly “Look out for that cart!” or “Horde of old ladies at three o’clock!” or “You don’t want to touch that,” or “You really don’t want to touch that,” or “Are you kidding, buddy?”

For what felt like the fifth time that day, Mark and Wes found themselves in free fall. This time, they were with a group of other skydivers. None of the parachutes worked, of course. Dozens of skydivers, reliving their death, their final moments where they realized exactly what must have gone wrong, and how they should’ve checked things more thoroughly before they jumped.

Despite the wind, words carried across space here easily, so that the air was filled with curses of all languages.

“How do you know where you’re going?” Mark yelled to Wes.

“It’s easy, pal! You just get used to thinking in seven dimensions after a while!”

“Seven dimensions?” Mark considered this, trying to ignore what looked like giant concrete doom hurling toward them at unimaginable speeds from below. “Now you’re just saying shit to fuck with my head! C’mon, I know what you’re thinking, ‘Oh, here’s someone who hasn’t been to Hell before, well, let’s just confuse him for fun!’ You can take your seven dimensions and stuff

them up your quantum—”

Splat.

“What was that, sir?” the waiter asked politely, leaning ever so slightly forward to hear Mark better. Mark looked at the menu in front of him and found himself unable to interpret any of it.

“He said he thinks he’ll have the fish,” Wes replied cheerfully. The waiter collected both menus and strode off before Mark could even take in the new setting—a lavishly decorated restaurant filled with chattering people and soothing music.

“I don’t even like fish,” Mark said. It was a stupid thing to say.

“Don’t worry, you won’t even get it,” Wes replied dismissively. He watched the waiter skillfully navigate in between the tables. “Hell for clumsy waiters.”

“Mm?”

As soon as Wes finished speaking, the waiter collided with a waitress carrying a tray full of drinks. The collision was spectacular: Drinks flew in beautiful arcs; the dark liquids stained tablecloths and clothes in perfect form. Time seemed to slow as if allowing the spectators to appreciate the event fully. When it was over and all waiters and drinks involved were securely fashioned to the ground by gravity, Wes clapped.

It started out slowly, the first clap breaking the embarrassed gasping, then built its way to a crescendo. There were glares and stares, but Wes

stood and kept on clapping anyway. For a moment, Mark felt the urge to join him, to clap along, to laugh at the folly of the human race, to forget just for a moment that he was vulnerable and to enjoy the stupidity of others. But he couldn't; something deep inside him was sickened by the smiling Wes, grinning and applauding the unfortunate victims of bad luck.

"C'mon, buddy," he said when he finished his awkward round of applause. Mark stood and followed Wes in the deafening silence. "We're almost there."

As the world changed around them once more, Mark commented with more venom than he intended, "So a bunch of waiters that made a few mistakes deserve to be in Hell?"

Wes suddenly turned and stared at him. "How old are you?" he asked, still smiling.

"Thirty," Mark replied.

"Thirty…" Wes motioned for him to keep going.

"Thirty and a bit, okay, okay."

"I've been around for millennia and I still haven't worked out the Universe, pal. Haven't even seen most of it. Anyway, Hell's not about judgment or any of that anymore, best I can figure out at least."

"What? Best you can figure out?"

"I don't run the place!" Wes laughed. Mark noticed it sounded forced. "The New

Management's working to suit everyone's needs. Oh, Hell worked well enough back in the old days. Now we've got all these religions mixing and cultures mixing and people wanting fire or seventy-two virgins or eternal whatever-whatever-whatever. Once there was right, and wrong, and a line. You crossed that line, you were either cooked or saved." Wes shrugged. "Now it's about regret or something, people finding their own Hells. I know how it works, I don't really care about why."

"You just care that it's entertaining, don't you?" Mark asked, finally cornering the mysterious man.

"Hit the nail on the head with that one, pal!"

The world pulled itself together. This time, it ended up being a long river. Wes and Mark stood in the thick plant life that had taken over the riverbanks on both sides.

"Here we are, the river. Hell for writers," Wes explained.

The color of this scene was mostly green, green put into the shapes of vines and trees and bushes and plants and overgrown grass. Green flowed into the lily pads that clogged up the river's water, which was nearly green itself with algae. Also sharing in the green with their own unique shades were the frogs, frogs that leapt and bound and swam throughout the river. Some were spotted, some were yellowish, some sat while others were hyperactive, but they were all very much frogs.

Wes turned to Mark. Mark had a question on his mind, and Wes merely waited patiently for him to ask.

"Where are the writers?"

"They're the Frogs," Wes replied simply.

"So this is what you meant by not being in his human suit."

The sounds of the world finally clicked into place. Brek-kek-kek-kek. Brek-kek-kek-kek. Co-ax. Co-ax. Frogs. Everywhere.

"Now, we're going to be searching for one particular Frog," Wes continued, as though explaining the next activity on a class trip to a kindergartner. "Don't worry, buddy, we'll find who we're looking for in no time at all."

Mark's eyes bounced from one frog to another. There must have been at least a hundred… at least…

"You know," Wes said, his green eyes staring directly into Mark's, "I'm starting to get the feeling you don't like me all that much."

PART FIVE: THE FROGS

"I HAVE TO use the restroom," Mark said automatically. In life, it was a good enough excuse to use when things were getting uncomfortable. It wasn't something that could be easily argued. "I have to use the restroom. Isn't there a goddamn bathroom in Hell?" he continued, walking away from Wes and looking around as though he'd find a bathroom just a few trees away.

"Probably somewhere…"

"I wish there was a damn bathroom!" Mark continued, not quite realizing that an excuse like this had about a snowball's chance of working in Hell.

"Ah…"

Behind Mark, the reeds shifted as they caught something falling from above. He turned to see a purple Porta-Potty lying sideways, caught in the overgrown grass and trees. Even from a few feet away, the stench was horrendous. Insects pulled

themselves away from the pond to circle around the rectangle of filth and disgust.

"Never… mind then?" Mark corrected himself, shrugging and giving a weak smile.

"Don't worry about it, buddy," Wes said, putting a hand on Mark's shoulder. It felt like cold plastic was touching his shirt. "In Hell, you always get what you wish for—you just end up regretting you wished it!"

"What in Hell's over here?" came a female voice somewhere in the reeds. A black-haired girl emerged from the green, parting the plant life as she walked. "What's this?" she demanded, pointing at the comfortably-resting portable toilet.

"Hello," Wes called over to her. "Don't mind us, we're just here to find the ferryman. There is still a ferryman here, isn't there?"

The girl strode up to Wes's frozen smiling face and stuck her own, soiled face into his. "You're looking at her."

"Ah, I see," Wes sighed through his perfectly aligned teeth. "Well, little miss, how long have you been—"

"It's a family business," she continued. Mark was mildly surprised that Wes didn't drop dead from the venom she spat out with every word. "My grandfather was the one that started it."

"Miss, is there—"

"Yes, there's a chance I can give you a boat ride. If you ask politely enough. And my name is

not ‘miss,’ my name is Elizabeth.”

“I knew your grandfather, Elizabeth,” Wes continued, standing his ground despite the girl’s invasion of his personal space. “We were good buddies, your granddad and I.”

“Friendship isn’t hereditary, mister.”

“My name is Wesir, but you can call me Wes.” The man managed to extend a hand in the limited space between their bodies. “May we please have a ride? With a cherry on top?” he added.

“We?” she asked, raising her eyebrows. Wes indicated Mark with a quick movement of his head, and Elizabeth turned to face him. Her clothing—a tank top and shorts—served as the canvas to whatever nature wanted to slap onto it. She was covered with dirt and mud; she had obviously given up on shoes long ago, as she walked barefoot. Her face was severe and her gaze was concentrated—at the moment, concentrated on Mark. “And who are you?”

“That’s Flavian,” Wes explained. “A pal of mine I brought down here to help me out a little. Flavian, this is Elizabeth, granddaughter of Charon, I believe. Funny, I never thought the old man would get away from the river long enough to raise a family, ha ha.”

“If he’s old, then what are you?” Elizabeth shot back without turning around. “Come on, Wes, Flavian, this way.”

“My name’s Mark,” Mark corrected the girl as

she walked past them. The uneven ground proved to be a challenge for the two men, but Elizabeth navigated it expertly. “Flavian’s my—my last name.”

“Same difference,” Elizabeth quipped. The trio walked along the riverbank, the only sounds coming from the croaking and splashing of the Frogs. A small boat bobbed up and down gently in the slow current, only a few feet away now. Elizabeth untied the rope anchoring the boat to land and held it tightly as Wes and Mark climbed aboard. She hopped in last, reeling the rope in with her.

“The marshlands,” Wes directed Elizabeth. After a cold pause, he added, “Please.”

The boat began to move, seemingly of its own accord, gently drifting downstream. Elizabeth looked over the edge and watched each frog as the boat floated past them.

“They’re good company,” she smiled, gazing at the wet, green souls. “Writers in life, every one of them. They think such interesting thoughts, burp out such interesting ideas. You learn to listen after awhile…” She closed her eyes. Mark gave her a quizzical look as she remained silent, apparently listening to and interpreting the sounds of the Frogs. “Anyway,” she said quite suddenly, straightening herself and returning to look at the lost soul and his lavender-suited guide, “that’s all I do anymore, is watch over these frogs. My

grandfather used to be busy all the time, ferrying souls from one world to the next. I wish I had his damn life. I feel like I'm sitting still too much. But the New Management decided it was too much figuring out every individual soul anymore. Now they make their own Hells out of their experiences in life. Damned idiot. Lucifer, now he was a decent guy. Knew how to take care of everybody. Levels, that's what he was always on about—making levels, putting everyone in levels. Now? Now? Thousands of souls come here every day with no one to greet them or sort them. Two people die every second. A hundred and twenty people a minute. Seventy-two hundred an hour. Hell, by the time someone finishes a nine-to-five workday, that's almost fifty-eight thousand souls moved onto one of the next worlds. I guess it would be impossible for a traditional ferryman—or woman—to keep up, these days, but I'd damn well like a shot. Hang on, the current's going to pick up a bit down here."

Mark wondered if the girl was talking to them, or to herself. He stopped wondering the instant the river met another, much faster river, and the boat shot ahead. Any and all thoughts and wonderings fell out of his brain and were immediately replaced by sheer terror and the desire for survival.

The river took a steep turn downwards, and got considerably more curvy. Mark gripped the

sides of the boat. Every turn now felt sharper and sharper; the current threw the boat from one curve to another and wasn't particularly interested in showing any mercy. Water and air mixed in a thick, wet combination; the river spat on the boat's passengers as it plummeted further downstream.

"I'M GOING TO DIE!" Mark yelled uncontrollably as the world blurred around him.

"Eventually!" came Wes's reassuring voice. "But don't worry—if you do, you won't have far to go!"

Mark clamped his eyes shut once again, unable to take the sensation that the world was moving in weird ways that his body wasn't entirely thrilled with. He heard the croaking of frogs and the undeniably childish laughter of Elizabeth. He couldn't help but join in laughing despite being absolutely positive that death was around the next turn. It escaped his body, rolling out of his mouth in great bursts; he was going to die, he was going to die, but damn if he wasn't enjoying the ride.

"YOU OKAY THERE, buddy?"

Everything stopped, save for the croaking. Mark found himself sprawled out on the bottom of the boat. Fighting against the forces of gravity and embarrassment, he pulled himself up.

"Pal?"

"Yeah, I'm good," Mark grunted. "At least we

—oh my God."

The boat had landed in a swamp. If there were hundreds of frogs on the river, thousands of frogs filled the world around them now. The brek-kek-kek-kek and co-ax of the Frogs intensified. Crooked branches covered most of the sunless sky, yet the colors of the swamp were vibrant.

"Good," Wes said. "Stand up, c'mon, stand up, that's it. Now, what do you see?"

"Lots of frogs," Mark said dully.

"We're buddies, right? We're a team?"

"I … guess."

"Here's the thing. You want something from Hell, and so do I, right, pal? You help me get what I want, and I'll help you get what you want. Agreed?" Wes stood and extended a hand. Mark shook it.

"Sure."

"Okay. What I need you to do is to go down there and tell those frogs to follow this boat. Got that?" Wes grinned, still grasping Mark's hand.

"Got that. Wait, how?"

"Okay buddy, in you go!"

With one hand still grabbing Mark's and the other pushed against Mark's chest, Wes shoved his victim overboard and into the murky waters of the swamp.

"What the HELL—son of a!—" Splash.

Wes watched Mark disappear, then returned to sitting in the boat. Elizabeth shot him a look.

“You’re an asshole,” she said shortly.

“Somebody’s got to be!” Wes smiled insanely, before the two of them lapsed into silence.

IT TOOK MARK a good few seconds of panicking, but he eventually came to the realization that you couldn’t die in a place designed for people already dead, and thus he didn’t need to breathe here.

As he swam, he passed several frogs doing the same thing. Feeling particularly stupid, he managed a bubbly sort of “Hello.”

One of the frogs stopped, turned, and hurried over towards Mark. It hovered in front of his face for a moment. “Afternoon, sir. Well, well, well, what have we here?” it asked, swimming to the back of Mark. “A fascinating mind. Bit average, nothing to be said about that. Strong ties to Earth —well, everyone starts out that way, don’t they?” The frog continued to swim around Mark, examining him from top to bottom, ducking in and out of his legs and around his arms.

“Sorry?” Mark bubbled.

“Belief in God, writes what’s on his mind, confused, fell in love—once, twice, three times, oh, and a thing for hot chocolate. All in all, your average, Grade-A, typical, typical, human.” The frog leaned his elbow on Mark’s shoulder. “Typ-ic-al,” it repeated, slower.

“You’re not making any sense.”

“I can’t imagine I do, I’ve been down here far, faaaar too long to make any sense to you. Here’s an eternity of twisting words of all languages, thinking, quoting, discussing. It’s peaceful down here. Bliss.” The frog gave a wide smile. “Human life—suffering, hatred, pain, uncertainty, fear, taxes, long lines at the grocer’s. Down here—bliss forever.”

“That’s what you’re condemned to? Eternal bliss?”

“Peace,” said another frog, floating past.

“Nothing but,” added another, swimming up to Mark’s right ear. Mark’s head jolted away.

“Do you want it?” the first frog asked.

“Want what?” Mark bubbled.

“Peace. Bliss. Forever.”

“Come with us,” another frog added. A small crowd of frogs gathered around Mark Flavian, each with its own unique pattern and plea.

“Up there—suffering. Down here—relief. Isn’t it obvious?”

“Go on, pull up a lily pad, sit in the sun. You’ll be one of us soon enough, why not stop now?”

“Earth is the real Hell for writers like you.”

“Swim a bit, won’t you?”

“Get outta here, guys,” Mark said, his voice wavering a bit. “This is Hell. This is Hell—this is HELL! I’m not planning to stay down here!” With that, he darted away from the frogs, yet another mob of amphibians interrupted his escape:

“Escape from Earth, join us in Hell, just sit and think and listen. Do not go back, do not return, unless you want to suffer further.”

The words of the Frogs, despite being borderline nonsense, began to have a hypnotic effect on Mark. The crowd grew with every word; frogs splashed in from trees and logs to join the group in talking to him.

“You’re a writer. You’re a writer. You’re a writer.”

“I’m a writer, I’m a writer, I’m a writer,” Mark repeated.

“Speak with us, swim with us. Go on, try it. Brek-kek-kek-kek,” one of the frogs croaked.

“Brek, kek, kek, kek?”

With that, Mark felt a certain release. He was swimming with frogs now; no need to form complete sentences, no desire to make his communication clear and understandable. He could speak nonsense; he was free of the English language, that horrid excuse for communication that involved wasting so much time trying to find the right combination of words to express an idea that took a mere split-second to pop into one’s mind.

“Brek kek, kek kek. Brek kek, kek kek,” Mark said again. No more fighting, no more fears of misinterpretation. Only nonsense syllables and smiles all around.

“Co-ax,” another frog put in, a deep croaking

sound.

"Ko-axe. Brek kek, brek kek kek kekek," Mark continued. The mob of frogs started swimming, and Mark followed in the current. "Brek-kek-kek-kek. Brek-kek-kek-kek. Rib-it, rib-it. Brek-kek-kek-kek-kek-kek-kek-kek…"

His croaking melded with the chorus of Frogs surrounding him on all sides, carrying him absolutely nowhere. Nothing but nonsense now, nothing but nonsense and smiles—genuine smiles, not the façade Wes always had on –

With that thought, memory came rushing in, pounding at the sides of his conscious and interrupting a rather long chain of brek-kek's.

"No! Stop! I don't belong here!" he yelled into the water, fighting the intense sounds of the souls around him. "I'm not a Frog. I'm not a dead writer —my name is Mark Flavian, born July 2nd, 1974 —I write, yes, I write for a television show!" he screamed. Bubbles flew out of his mouth now as he resisted the croaking chorus. "But that doesn't mean anything, that doesn't mean shit, because above all that, I'm an Earthling and damn—well—proud—of—it!"

Mark forced an image of the planet into his mind—a picture of it, a famous one, from a satellite image perhaps, or maybe the Moon landing. He burned it into his imagination, as though God himself were carving a blue-green marble forever into his brain matter. It hurt,

pulling himself away from the Frogs—it brought back all the pain of life upon him, pain he had ignored since he had crossed the Void.

"I know why you're damned!" Realization hit him like a wrecking ball. "I know why you're damned! Bliss isn't all it's cracked up to be! I know why you're damned—you're no longer writers! Because all writers need that—that fundamental wrongness in their heads, something that's just a bit off, like God didn't wire your brains up all the way properly, like there's just a neuron or two in the wrong spot. The only thing that saves you from going mad is thinking, and now you're stuck in an eternity where you can't think!"

He propelled himself to the surface, aiming for the spot just to the right of the boat's underside. Neither passenger flinched when Mark flung himself over the side, dripping wet, breathing deeply to try to calm himself.

"That didn't work, did it?" Wes inquired. Mark shook his head; water cascaded out of his hair and into the boat. "Don't worry, pal, it's no biggie. There's got to be more than one way to collect souls."

"My grandfather knew how," Elizabeth put in. "I'll take you to him—if, you say please."

Wes's plastic grin almost looked genuine. "Yes. Please."

PART SIX: SCALES

THE EDGE OF Hell was rocky and dark. Sky didn't exist here; in its place, Earth and stars loomed over the uneven landscape. Mark thought it looked otherworldly, then remembered it was otherworldly.

Rocks and sand crunched under their footsteps as the trio pressed forward. A few feet ahead, on a relatively flat stretch of land, a small fire blazed, attended by a single old man. Despite the desolate atmosphere of the place, the old man seemed happy.

"Enjoying retirement, gramps?" Elizabeth, at the front of the group, asked.

"Yes, yes," the old man nodded in a faraway sort of fashion, as old men tend to do, "enjoying it very much. How is my little Liz?" he asked, not turning away from the fire.

"Bored out of my mind," the girl replied frankly. "These two are the most excitement I've

had for the last hundred years."

"Oh, you and your little exaggerations."

"Grandpa, this is Wes and Flavian," Elizabeth said, indicating the two men behind her. "Wes, Flavian, this is my grandfather, Charon."

Wes bowed a polite little bow; Mark gave a pathetic wave.

"Wes—" A flicker of recognition passed through Charon's eyes. "Ah! Wes! It's been so long," he said, getting to his feet, struggling somewhat with his frail body.

"Yes, it has," Wes agreed, striding over to Charon to lend him support. The old man batted him away.

"Get off, Wesir, I can handle myself! What brings you to this part of the underworld?" he rasped. "It's beautiful here, isn't it? No people, no souls, no more floating back and forth for millennia on end. Oh, near-death experiences were the worst. You had a soul halfway across Acheron and suddenly they're back on Earth and you're left with an empty boat!"

"Well, I've come here about souls, Charon," Wes said. "Specifically—how do you get a few thousand into a boat at once?"

"Oh yes, had that problem once or twice. The Crusades, you know." Charon motioned for Elizabeth and Mark to come closer to the fire, then motioned for the whole group to sit. "Yes, the Crusades," he continued, gazing up at the blue-

green planet above. “Lots and lots of infidels all dying at the same time. Thank Zeus for magical objects.”

“I see, and what did you use to ferry all those souls across at once?” Wes asked, with the friendliness of an interviewer on television.

“Hold on,” Charon said, and rolled over on his hands and knees. In the uneven landscape, several large rocks had come together in such a way that it made a natural cave. He reached in and fumbled about a bit, searching for something. “It’s funny, I think one of those near-death ones saw me using this. Sometimes I wonder if it was ever some kind of inspiration to him. Maybe down on Earth they’ve made a shrine shaped like this, you know? Humans are funny people. Ah-ha, here it is.”

Charon’s arm reemerged, his bony fingers gripping a strange device. No—even worse, it wasn’t a strange device. It was a ridiculously familiar device.

“A blender?” Mark asked aloud.

“This condenses all the souls so they’re easier to carry,” Charon explained, handing the blender over to Wes. “I was saving it just in case the New Management needed us to ferry souls again. Probably not going to happen,” he lamented. Elizabeth folded her arms and shot the world at large a nasty look.

“This is fascinating,” Wes said, turning the blender over and over in his hands. As Mark stared

—he couldn't help himself—a joke he learned from Earth entered his mind uninvited: How do you fit a hundred babies into a bucket? A blender. Well, now it was a question of "How do you fit thousands of frogs into a bucket?" and the answer, unfortunately, seemed to remain the same.

Wes stopped examining the blender and looked up at Mark, then Elizabeth, and finally, Charon. "Can I borrow this for a bit, old buddy? I need to do something."

"Anything for you." Charon's wrinkled eyes smiled. "Anything for you, Wesir."

ANOTHER STOMACH-CHURNING RIDE later, Mark found himself on a boat with a madman and a dangerous girl in the middle of a swamp for the second time that day.

"Now, let's see how this works," Wes said, rubbing his hands together in excitement. He took the lid off. "All sorts of buttons here… oh, let's see if this is the one…"

He pressed it.

The blender emitted a soft whrrr-ing sound as thousands of frogs in the various rivers of Hell lifted into the air. Mark could hardly see them all; the ones in the background looked like a swarm of green flies. None of them seemed particularly concerned that they were flying up out of their environment, nor did they struggle when the whole group of them started to rotate. Odd

shadows played on the boat as the frogs gained speed, forming a frog tornado of sorts. The mass of amphibians blurred into a greenish funnel, pouring itself into the blender. Within twenty seconds, all several thousand damned souls were safely in the blender, although they had the consistency of a liquid now.

Wes replaced the lid and patted the blender, satisfied. “That was definitely the one. Right, buddy?”

“Right,” Mark mumbled. He was getting tired of the world getting weirder and weirder. Even everyday life looked normal compared to this.

“Elizabeth, I have some specific directions for you,” Wes said, beaming at her. She gave him a quizzical look, as though she had not heard him. “Please,” Wes added, and now there was a sickening layer of happiness added onto his speech.

“YOU OKAY, BUDDY?” Wes asked as he and Mark walked across the surprisingly lukewarm sand. There was nothing but sand now—sand, sand, and more sand. It was heaven, if you were a cat with diarrhea. For the average person, like Mark, it was boring and sandy, though mostly boring.

“I think I want to go home,” Mark replied. Even as an adult, it sounded childish. But it was true; he was starting to get a little homesick.

“We’re almost done,” Wes promised him, patting him on the back. “Just a little further.”

Suddenly, there was a pyramid.

“Where the hell did that come from?” Mark exclaimed.

“I don’t know, seems rather rude to just be popping in like that, doesn’t it pal?” Wes strode towards it.

“Where are you going?”

“Inside, of course,” Wes laughed.

Just like that, there was a door on the pyramid. Not the sort of fancy, hieroglyph-covered, gilded, artsy, Egyptian door you might expect, either. No; just a regular old white door, with a doormat in front.

“No place like home,” Wes quipped as he opened the door and stepped inside. Mark followed.

The place had the feel of a car-less garage—the sort of place where everything in the house goes to die. Things, things Mark couldn’t attach a label to for his life, were piled high. Torches lit the pyramid, and shadows danced on the floor and slanted walls, making the already huge stacks of things appear even larger.

In this new light, Wes looked different. And by “different,” he looked… green. Green as the liquid inside the blender he was carrying.

“There was a time when death was simpler,” Wes explained as he rooted through the piles.

“One heart, one scale, one weight, and you were either saved or eaten. That’s when I was in charge.”

“You were in charge?” Mark repeated. “Satan?”

“Nah, Lucifer was the new guy. I’m someone a little different.” Every time Mark blinked, or his eyes didn’t focus completely, a part of Wes changed. His skin was definitely green now; he was taller, thinner, dressed in white instead of lavender. He had no suit; he was dressed in plain white. His legs seemed to have undone wrappings around them, as though he were partially mummified. “Oh look! I can’t believe I found this.” His green hand reached out and plucked a mostly conical white hat with colorful feathers on either side. “How do I look?” he asked, turning around to face Mark.

“Different,” Mark replied. His breath seemed to be escaping him now. This Wes—this green-skinned, tall, white-clothed version of Wes—was more real than his human shell could ever have been. The grin on his face no longer shone like plastic; it was pure, genuine happiness now.

“Before the New Management, before Lucifer, before a couple of other minor gods and deities nobody cares about—there was me!” Wes spread his arms wide, presenting himself to a crowd of one. “Osiris! God of the Underworld!”

Mark just stared.

“Well, not exactly,” Osiris corrected himself. “God of the Underworld and Rejuvenation. I didn’t just run the show down here, I helped out a bit up there too. I helped keep both worlds ticking. Of course, then along came Lucifer, and the only reason he got the job was because of everyone’s sympathy. Well, between that and the New Management there wasn’t much for me to do anymore but hang around Limbo.

“So without Hell, what’s left? Earth, of course. Great place, right, buddy?”

Mark nodded.

“Well you’re wrong. Earth sucks, pal. That’s because everyone’s all split up and disorganized and running around worrying about themselves. But that’s all right. All the Earth needs is a sharp poke in the south pole, if you catch my drift? And what better to jump-start some thinking than a good old dead writer? After all, ninety-eight percent of all great literature is based off of dead writers!”

After some more searching, Osiris finally located what he wanted. He put the blender down and began bringing materials to the center of the pyramid. Scales—lots of scales of all shapes and sizes, with various carvings and decorations on them. And jars. Lots and lots of jars. Once he had finished, Osiris sat down in the middle of all this, grabbed the blender, and opened it up.

“The only question that remains is, which dead

writer do I bring back?"

He poured exactly half of the liquid into one jar, and the other half into another. Carefully, he picked both of them up and placed them on one of the ancient scales. Despite both jars having the same design and carrying the same amount of liquid, one end of the scale tipped visibly further than the other.

"All souls are not equal. These scales measure something beyond just weight. It's all about what soul makes the biggest dent in the Universe…"

Then, silence, save for the squeaking of the scales and the pouring of the liquid. Osiris, obviously unhurried, divided the liquid again and again into smaller and smaller jars, all the while searching for the heaviest.

IT WAS PROBABLY the silence that did Mark in. For the rest of the day, he had been too busy running, yelling, swimming, falling, riding a boat, or generally wandering in confusion to think much. Now, sitting in the pyramid with no distractions, his thoughts finally caught up with him.

Reality smacked Mark in the face like a cold, wet fish.

"I'm in Hell," he said.

Osiris didn't pay attention.

"None of this makes sense. None of it! Falling tiles—frogs—traffic—picnics—waiters—soda—

portable bathrooms… I'm sitting here, in a pyramid, with a green-skinned man, watching him measure out bits of a GIANT FROG MILKSHAKE!"

No response from Osiris.

"What am I doing here? What the hell's going on—I just want out! OUT, DAMN IT! Two people a second. A hundred twenty a minute, seventy-two hundred AN HOUR… I'm not finished yet, this isn't my time! I belong on Earth! I WANT TO GET BACK TO EARTH! No more frog milkshakes, just your plain ordinary hot chocolate, and no pyramids popping up out of nowhere." He steadied himself now. "I just need to get back to Earth."

He looked at Osiris, who was still deeply concentrated on his work.

"DAMMIT MAN, CAN'T YOU HEAR ME?!"

"Yes, and you're very loud," Osiris replied levelly.

"I'm your buddy, I'm your pal, right?" Mark exclaimed, walking over to Osiris. "When do we get out of here? …Buddy? …Pal?"

Osiris looked up at Mark for the first time since he had started working. "You don't need to get out of here," he said cheerfully. "You wanted to see Ivan again, and I wanted to find a writer to take back up. I'll take who I need and leave you with the Frogs."

"No! Take me back with you! I didn't even want to see Ivan that badly—I thought it was all some kind of joke—"

“I can’t take you back with me. The New Management isn’t stupid! If it sees two souls coming down to Hell and three going back up—well, I don’t really want to find out what happens next, and neither do you!”

Mark fell to his knees: “Buddy! Pal!”

One of the jars toppled over, and the green liquid poured out. It immediately became thicker, and parts of the liquid stuck to one another, forming shapes—forming frogs.

At least a dozen frogs were out before the god or the human reacted; by the time they realized what was happening, there were already a hundred frogs hopping around the place, their croaks echoing throughout the pyramid.

“I’m getting out of here,” Mark breathed through his teeth. “I’m getting out of here, and I don’t care how!” With that, he toppled the scales, spilling jars and frogs everywhere. Their cries had no effect on Mark now—nothing stood between him and his precious planet. They did, however, have an effect on Osiris, something Mark didn’t bother to observe as he maddeningly spilled every last drop of frog milkshake.

Giving up on Mark, the frogs enveloped Osiris instead. The croaking approached a deafening level, thanks to the acoustics of the pyramid. Mark just stared at the mess he created and watched as Osiris succumbed to the power of the frogs. Osiris had no Earth, no ties to any world; and thus, he

became a frog.

At least, this is what Mark assumed. When the frogs finally leapt off of Osiris, he saw no Osiris there anymore. Instead, there was a bit of an odd frog with deep green eyes, green eyes that looked all too familiar.

Mark bent down to examine the blender, took a guess, pushed a button, and within seconds he was alone with a blender full of frog milkshake.

PART SEVEN: LIFE

MARK FLAVIAN WAS not a crazy person. That is, he didn't like things crazy. This isn't to say that he liked his life nice and neat—in fact, he took his daily routine with one or two lumps of surprises, and maybe a pinch of insanity. But he was tired of the Universe screwing with him.

Well, now was his chance to screw the Universe.

He dashed through the sand before finding Elizabeth waiting at the river. He didn't explain; she didn't ask. She took him back to the marsh as he requested.

"It's so annoying," Mark sighed as he poured the frogs back into the marsh. As soon as each frog hit water, it darted away from the boat in its own unique direction. "All this and I'm just going to end up being a Frog for all eternity anyhow."

"Hell's not eternal," Elizabeth said. "Some people move on."

“Move on? Where?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Once, when I was younger, I got lost in Hell. I saw a lot. It didn’t disturb me so much because, well, Hell was all I knew. But I think I know how the New Management’s got it set up. They’re not all that clever.”

“How?”

“People torture themselves just by thinking. That’s how it is here—everybody’s put in a place where they can’t get their mind off the past, and for the most part they’re finished. But it’s not forever. There’s an escape.”

“Eject button, somewhere?”

“No, it’s so obvious that no one bothers to think about it. Is there still a sign about abandoning hope you see when you enter?”

“Several, actually.” Mark shook the blender to make sure every last drop was out, and every last frog was returned to the swamp.

“No one that’s still here has abandoned hope. It’s that simple.”

“Well, it’s not that easy.”

“Simple and easy aren’t the same thing.”

Mark grimaced at the swamp, the Hell he stood in, the Universe.

“You understand the nonsense the Frogs are saying?” Mark asked Elizabeth as the air filled with croaking and splashing.

“Sometimes, yeah. It’s nonsense, but it’s

entertaining nonsense."

"Could you recognize any of them if I told you their name? Like, Ivan Taylor? Is he around?"

"Oh, Ivan. He's a lazy ass. Usually asleep on the lily pads somewhere. We'll find him, if you want him. Hell if I know why."

MARK STEPPED ONTO the rocky land at the edge of Hell, beyond the river Acheron.

"How do I get back?" he asked Elizabeth, who sat in the boat. Light reflecting from the Earth above cast a thin layer of blue on the rocks, which extended far into the distance.

"I think," she squinted, "you have to walk about a thousand years in that direction." She pointed out towards eternity.

Mark looked at the never-ending landscape, and then down at the frog Elizabeth was pretty sure was Ivan. Ivan said Rib-it, proving he wasn't much more help in death than he was in life. Mark sighed.

"I wish there was an easier way," he mumbled.

Ding.

A patch of air opened up to reveal the interior of an elevator. Mark stuck his head inside. Yup, an elevator it was. With only one button. He could guess where it went.

"Well, I'm out," he said, and stepped into the elevator.

"Hey," Elizabeth called to him. Mark stepped

forward so the elevator doors wouldn't close. "Maybe I'm trying too hard to be human, but, today I finally got to carry souls. In a blender, mind you, but souls are souls. So thanks."

"You're welcome," Mark replied, caught slightly off guard.

"See you in Hell," she said. Mark stepped back; he pressed the button; the doors closed; the elevator jerked to life.

"Where's the catch?" he asked, glancing around the tiny elevator. Ivan looked quizzical. "Where's the catch?" Mark repeated to himself. "I wished for an easier way, I got it. Now what?"

Ding.

The doors opened.

"Oh, shit."

THE HOUR-LONG ELEVATOR ride that ensued was too terrible to document in full detail.

It started innocently enough. A man in his forties entered the elevator. There was some awkward silence, some well-intended yet fruitless coughing, some shuffling around of feet, some croaking, but it wasn't too bad. Suddenly, Beethoven blasted from the man's pocket, and he pulled a cell phone out of it. A very loud, one-sided conversation ensued.

The minutes dragged on. The elevator's next occupant walked in some time later, dripping with sweat, having obviously come from a gymnasium

somewhere. The phone conversation assaulted Mark's ears while the body odor assaulted his nostrils.

The next passenger on this hellish journey was a woman whose fat spilled out of her clothing. Her makeup was atrocious, and her perfume completely masked the smell of the other man's body odor, a smell Mark was just beginning to tolerate.

A teenager dressed in black came sobbing into the elevator, crying about his parents, his life, and the world's lack of understanding about his misfortunes. He almost immediately retreated to one of the elevator's corners and spent the rest of his time there trying to cut himself with a butter knife.

A pre-teenager soon followed, a young girl with her iPod on loud enough for Mark to make out the lyrics of the songs she was listening to. Hallelujah, it's rainin' men… hallelujah, it's rainin' men… hallelujah, it's rainin' men…

"Ivan, I don't know if you can hear me," Mark whispered to the frog cupped in his hands, "but damn it, an eternity of swimming in a river doesn't seem so bad anymore!" Of course, now he realized why the elevator only had one button. There was no turning back. Osiris was right: You did get what you wanted in Hell, only to find out you didn't want it.

The final passenger was a monkey. It didn't do

much, didn't stink up the place or chatter or come in with a loud mp3 player. It just sort of sat and stared at Mark. Mark returned the stare for some time before giving up and slumping down in a corner.

He couldn't sleep—not with the one-sided conversation or the iPod or the crying or the stench of sweat or the perfume, at least. But closing his eyes made the trip slightly more bearable. He focused on some more famous pictures of Earth from space, thought about his life and the people he probably should be missing right now. Regret evaporated from his body, replaced by a deep longing for home.

Ding.

Mark's eyes shot open. He was alone in the elevator. Thank Heavens, he thought to himself, I'm alone again. That was impossible…

I'm alone again!

"Ivan!" he yelled. He patted himself down, wondering if the frog had gotten into someplace he shouldn't have. There were no frog-shaped bulges in his pockets, and the elevator was bare. He cursed the elevator, himself, and the deepest regions of Hell. Then he realized where the elevator had stopped: Inside of a little Internet café early in the morning.

Cautiously, hoping not to alarm anyone by stepping out of thin air, he exited the elevator. To his surprise, the doors didn't close; instead, the

interior of the elevator remained there, hovering, a rectangular gap in space. Mark decided it was best to ignore it. If he had accidentally caused a dimensional anomaly, he damn well didn't want to look like the guilty one.

One hand grabbed the cup of hot chocolate waiting for him at his table, and the other turned on his laptop. He sat. He checked his shoulder several times, half-expecting a crazed man in a lavender suit to pop up and tell him his best friend was dead.

As it turned out, his best friend was alive and well, and came skidding into the café. Mark knew he had an idea—nothing else could make him so jumpy during daylight hours. Ivan nearly leapt into the seat opposite Mark, enthusiasm radiating from him so strongly that the steam from Mark's hot chocolate was blowing away from him.

Mark smiled. He'd done it, he'd screwed the Universe. About damn time, too. Ivan was back on Earth as though nothing had happened, and no one seemed to notice the gaping hole in space a few feet behind Mark's chair. Maybe he was the only one that could see it. Maybe it was all in his imagination. At any rate, he'd gotten the world back for all the things he'd gone through since an outdated god showed up in the café he was sitting in and taken him through a tollbooth.

"I have it," Ivan said, his eyes gleaming with excitement, his hands gesticulating wildly. "What

we couldn't work out in the script last night—I've got it, I've got the perfect plot device!" He laughed triumphantly, slapping the table. "It's a little weird, but hear me out on this, Mark."

"I'm listening," Mark said.

"Okay. It's about"—Ivan paused for a moment, savoring the idea—"frogs."

A tinny laugh track emitted from the elevator's interior before it closed shut and disappeared. Mark sighed and couldn't help but smile.

Just like that, the Universe had won again.